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4 Since the 1990s, irony has been and continues to be a salient feature in contemporary cultural, critical, and political debate. The simultaneously opposing positions—living in the age of irony and having reached its end—suggest that the debate surrounding irony is far from settled. Moreover, irony's prevalence, both its defense and its attack, as well as its definitional difficulties make it a slippery subject, despite efforts by numerous scholars and critics to understand and analyze it. Taking into consideration its long and rich tradition in the West (and in the Unites States in particular), Lee Konstantinou offers an entirely new perspective on the meaning and function of irony in the U.S. after world War II. In his brilliant study, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*, Konstantinou examines the transition from irony to postirony in the post-1945 literary field.

5 While recognizing irony's critical function, "as a dialectical movement of resistance and incorporation" (8), Konstantinou contends that, having lost its cutting edge, irony changes form and significance "in tandem with larger transformations in American political, economic and educational institutions" (9). He then proceeds to examine irony's "alleged hegemony" by adopting what he calls a "characterological approach"; that is, an analysis of defenses and critiques of irony through case studies of five character types: the hipster, the punk, the believer, the coolhunter, and the occupier. Divided into two parts ("Irony" and "Postirony"), the book comprises four chapters and a conclusion, which correspond to the above mentioned five characterological figures and are presented in approximate chronological order.

6 In the first chapter, entitled "The Hipster as Critic," Konstantinou takes as his object of study the contested image of the hipster. He calls the hipster "the Ur-ironist of postwar

life" (51), for whom irony was his primary "attitudinal weapon in his war against mainstream conformity" (53). However, the hipster's masterful use of irony corresponded with the modernist ironic reading not just of poetry but of modern culture itself. This convergence of highbrow intellectual culture with hip culture at midcentury is examined in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Thomas Pynchon's *V*. Both writers, albeit their differences, bring together "critical irony and a version of the hipster at the center of their artistic vision" (54).

7 Ellison's B.P. Rinehart is the most obvious hipster-like figure, whose ironic self-conception will be crucial to the invisible man's transformation into a hipster and a critical ironist. Not only will his ironic narrator manage to transcend African American fictional stereotypes, but he will come to represent universal humanity. The figure of the hipster as critic is next studied in Pynchon's work. From the unfinished musical "Minstrel's Island" to the short story "Entropy" to his early novel *V*., Pynchon's ironist is the outcome of his critical engagement with postwar modernist literary practices, on the one hand, and post-Beat counterculture, on the other. Konstantinou persuasively argues that, in his characterological portrayal of the African American jazz musician McClintic Sphere in *V*., Pynchon tried to dissolve the hipster-critic opposition, proposing "a third way of irony" (90) which would simultaneously transcend the Beats and postwar modernism. Although fraught with political danger, Sphere's advice to himself "Keep cool, but care," best exemplifies the ethos of Pynchon's higher ironist.

8 Chapter Two, "Punk's Positive Dystopia," addresses the "crisis of confidence in the future" felt among the unemployed young, as a result of the political-economic dilemmas of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Escalating the critical irony of the hipster, the punk sought to join the cultural production on her own terms. Punk cultivated what Konstantinou calls "positive dystopia" (106), which entails a narrative genre as well as a political vision. In his view, punk was neither co-opted nor sold-out. It participated in a critique of early neoliberalism, being both uncompromisingly oppositional and accessible to everyone. The characterological model of the punk is then reconstructed in the writings of William S. Burroughs and Kathy Acker.

9 Although Burroughs did not identify himself as punk, he was instrumental in creating positive dystopias, as *The Wild Boys* and its sequel, *Port of Saints*, attest. Konstantinou highlights Burroughs's enormous influence in writers, cinematographers, visual artists and in particular musicians, to the point that it is hard to construe his writing as anticapitalist. His cut-up techniques, his celebration of spontaneous order in response to centralized state power, were adopted and extended by Kathy Acker, the "most artistically innovative punk interpreter of Burroughs" (136). Acker's punk "prose assemblages" (137), nonreified body-language (inspired by Luce Irigaray), and antidialectical thought are emplotted in her positive dystopias, as is her *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. In that novel, Acker creates the spiritual child of punk, the girl pirate; an ambiguous figure, to be sure, in that she denounces material property rights at the same time as she advocates open markets. Nevertheless, given punk's mainstream success, it is hard to claim that its attempts to challenge social order have not been commodified and appropriated by the capitalist system.

10 If punk's anti-authoritarian ethos and aesthetics were systematically assimilated by the dominant classes, how else to resist hegemonic ideology but by totally opposing punk ironic vision and embracing the ethic of sincerity and postironic belief? In Chapter Three (of the book's Part Two), Konstantinou examines the characterological

countertype of the believer, whose architect is David Foster Wallace. Having written extensively on Wallace before and having co-edited *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (2012), Konstantinou contends that the American writer's ultimate goal was to create possibilities of intersubjective "genuine . . . communication" (168). From his widely read essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," to one of his most oft-interpreted stories, "Octet," to his magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, Wallace, in the 1990s, sought to transcend the paradox of postmodern irony's inextricable entanglement with the marketplace by advocating the ethos of postsecular belief and adopting a stance of "nonnaive noncynicism by means of metafiction" to confront the solipsistic relativity of postmodernity (174).

11 Konstantinou then traces Wallace's artistic influence on the writing and publishing career of Dave Eggers. Like Wallace, Eggers "means to make his readers into believers" (198). In his memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggers invites his readers to believe in his sincerity and cultivate an optimistic ethos of belief. But whereas Wallace's confrontation with postindustrial, media-saturated world rests within "the tradition of symbolic action and culturally oriented activism" (215), Eggers's oeuvre, including his independent publishing company *McSweeney's*, aimed at constructing "alternative institutions" to inform his readers and involve them in collective projects (216). Obviously, Konstantinou privileges Eggers's modest institutional projects, although he remains skeptical as to whether the characterological model of the believer can challenge the political-economic institutions that troubled his creators.

12 Eloquently and rigorously moving through time, Chapter Four introduces readers to post-9/11 culture and the postironic figure of the coolhunter (also called trendspotter). The latter is "a schismatic type of person," charged with "synthesizing detachment and investment, the market and meaning, the statistical and the personal, and irony and commitment" (219). Konstantinou discusses the character of the coolhunter in fiction, including Alex Shakar's *The Savage Girl*, William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. All three novels, published in the 2000s, belong to the growing subgenre of "socioeconomic science fiction" (224), which—instead of technology–features a type of person who struggles constantly for uncooptable meanings in postironic consumer culture. To a greater extent than the punk, and in the cultural economy of postirony, the coolhunter is trapped between detachment and participation in the market, being at once "a producer and a consumer of culture" (269). At best, the lesson the coolhunter teaches us, according to Konstantinou, is to sensitize ourselves to the global networks we find ourselves in and, based on hyperawareness, attempt to make meaningful choices.

13 It is always easier to write about cultural practices that are long past than trying to identify emerging ones. With distance comes hindsight, but writing about current trends and attitudes is a difficult task. Konstantinou's compelling and meticulously researched study accurately maps irony's lost efficacy since the 1950s. To devise a future, to decide now how and in what ways to intervene in the current cultural situation is, however, even more demanding to accomplish. In the book's concluding section, Konstantinou attempts to open up space for a new kind of postironic ethos; one that would take for granted the power of the marketplace to absorb oppositions, while, at the same time, it would explore new modes of collective engagement.

14 Inspired by the Occupy movement and the paradoxes produced by Occupy's style of anarchist politics, Konstantinou contends "[t]he characterological question Occupy

raised was nothing less than what form our collective subjectivity should take" (273). The characterological figure in question is that of the occupier whom he finds in an emergent narrative genre, the postironic Bildungsroman (275), and, in particular, in Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* and Jonathan Lethem's *Dissident Gardens* (both published in 2013). In the study's final page, Konstantinou urges readers to add political action to their ironic inheritance, "while simultaneously developing a non-ironic commitment to learning how to build enduring institutions that have the capacity to rouse spirits but also dismantle the power of those whose strength partly depends on our cynicism" (288). Though he remains cautiously optimistic, navigating through short-term, "dull" collective engagement while dodging long-term visions, Konstantinou does not excite the reader when it comes to proposing culture-specific postironic attitudes and traits. Nevertheless, one has a lot to gain from Konstantinou's erudite insights, his thought-provoking arguments and well-research analyses of literary and cultural texts.

15 *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* is a rich, dynamic, and intensely interesting study that will be of interest to both undergraduate students encountering the concept of irony in American fiction, and seasoned scholars. It poses timely questions, inviting new and invigorating perspectives on literary (and cultural) texts and will doubtless inspire readers within academia and beyond.

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